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Siljander gets flak over taped plea

By Susan Benkelman
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Michigan Rep. Mark Siljander could lose significant support in Tuesday's primary election over a tape he sent to fundamentalist clergy urging support for him to "break the back of Satan," the local Republican chairman predicted Saturday.

"I think this is probably going to hurt Siljander," said Harold Schuitmaker, Republican chairman for the 4th Congressional District in southwestern Michigan.

He predicted the controversy would cost the incumbent at least 4 to 5 percentage points.

THE CONSERVATIVE Siljander, of Three Rivers, is being challenged in Tuesday's primary by the more moderate Fred Upton, a former aide to David Stockman, who was Siljander's predecessor in Congress.

Siljander last week sent tapes to fundamentalist clergy in his district to play for their congregations. On the tape, Siljander does not refer to Upton by name but implies that the challenger has been leading a "smear" campaign.

He asks people to pray and to fast for the election and says that "in order to break the confusion, the smears, the attacks, the impugning of my integrity during ... in this all important primary, we need to break the back of Satan and the lies that are coming our way."

Late Saturday night, Siljander said: "The tape was directed specifically to Christians. They speak my language. It was a spiritual thing. It has nothing to do with my opponent.

"I'm not saying that I have some sort of anointment on my shoulders, that if somehow people don't vote for me they aren't Christian. God may move for someone to vote for Fred Upton."

Upton, who left his job in the

Office of Management and Budget, has presented Siljander with what political observers say is his toughest primary challenge yet.

SCHUITMAKER SAID Saturday that until he heard the tape, he expected Siljander to win. After hearing it, he said he thinks it's a toss-up. Schuitmaker ran against Siljander for the GOP nomination in 1984, but said he believes he is objective.

"Many of the people who were going to vote for him because he's the incumbent and hasn't done anything to get them upset, might take another look at him," Schuitmaker said.

One of those most offended by the tape was the Rev. William Kostlevy, pastor of the Florence Church of the Brethren in Constantine. Mr. Kostlevy received the tape, played it, and immediately turned it over to the Upton campaign.

"I come from a religious tradition deeply committed to the separation of church and state," Mr. Kostlevy said. "I believe the tape crossed a legitimate boundary."

"I KNOW those boundaries are hard to draw but my concern was that Congressman Siljander equated his success at the polls with the success of the kingdom of God and that is a dangerous thing.

"People who consider themselves Christians need to ask themselves whether they are being used," Mr. Kostlevy said.

Vic Klatt, a spokesman for the Upton campaign, said that by Saturday morning the candidate's headquarters had received more than 50 calls from people who said they had changed their minds about supporting Siljander when they heard about the tape.

But Siljander's supporters said the message was taken out of context by

both Upton and the press.

"ALL THE hype on this seems like it's being stretched out of proportion," said Paul Booko, co-paster of Siljander's hometown church, the Three Rivers Christian Fellowship.

"He was just calling upon Christians to pray for the election," he said. "He doesn't specifically call Fred Upton Satan, but from what I've read people are trying to take it out of its true intention."

"The whole flavor of the tape was to call upon Christians to pray, which is a fine thing to call upon people to do," Mr. Booko said.

Upton supporters predicted that the flap could also bring their candidate support from ministers in the community offended by the message.

The winner of Tuesday's primary will face Democrat Dan Roche, a retired CIA agent and college professor. The 4th district, however, has not elected a Democrat since 1932.